

# Greatness of Soul and the Souls of Women:

*Rousseau's use of Plato's Laws in the Letter to D'Alembert*

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In the preceding issue of this journal, I extracted from Plato's *Laws* what I believe Rousseau took as the inspiration for his own *Letter to D'Alembert*.<sup>2</sup> In this article, I show how I think Rousseau applied what he found in Plato to the politics of his own time and place.

In his first public statement as a political philosopher, Rousseau condemned the public entertainments of his time and railed against a culture of luxury in which "men have sacrificed their taste to the Tyrants of their liberty."<sup>3</sup> In a footnote to this statement, he offered an intriguing aside:

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<sup>2</sup> Nelson Lund, "Greatness of Soul and the Souls of Women: Plato's *Laws* as an Introduction to Rousseau's *Letter to D'Alembert*," *American Dialectic* Vol. 2, No. 3 (2012): 216-49.

<sup>3</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts*, in *Œuvres Complètes*, vol. III, ed. Bernard Gagnebin & Marcel Raymond (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1959-1995), 21 [hereafter cited as *O.C.*]. All citations to Rousseau's work will be to this edition, and the translations are my own. Good English editions, keyed to the Pléiade pagination, can be found in *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*, ed. Roger D. Masters & Christopher Kelly (Hanover, N.H: University Press of New England, 1990-2009); *The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings*, ed. & trans. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); *Rousseau: The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings*, ed. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

I am far from thinking that this ascendancy of women is a harm in itself. It is a gift bestowed upon them by nature for the happiness of the human race: better directed, it might produce as much good as today it does harm. We are not sufficiently aware of what advantages would arise from giving a better education to that half of the human race that governs the other. Men will always be what is pleasing to women: if then you want them to become great and virtuous, teach women what greatness of soul and virtue is. The reflections this subject provokes, and which Plato made in bygone times, greatly deserve to be better developed by a pen worthy of following such a master and of defending a cause so great.<sup>4</sup>

When Rousseau first mentioned that Plato was the master he would wish to follow in promoting an appropriate education for women, he could hardly have foreseen the occasion that would provoke him to take up his pen in defense of that cause. The *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts*, in which he made this comment, together with the ensuing *Discourse on Inequality*, soon established his position as a major philosophic voice in the French Enlightenment. That voice, of course, was one of rebellion against important elements of the Enlightenment project itself, and against Rousseau's own circle of philosophic friends.

A public break with these friends, and especially with his close companion Denis Diderot, came in response to Jean-Baptiste le Rond D'Alembert's article on Geneva in the *Encyclopedia*.<sup>5</sup> The article itself was highly favorable to the city of Rousseau's birth. It described a prosperous, democratic polity populated with industrious and well-educated citizens, largely free of conflicts between the civil and religious authorities, and open to scientific

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid. note \*.

<sup>5</sup> As so often happens with Rousseau, his philosophizing and his personal life become entangled in the *Letter to D'Alembert*. For a brief and useful treatment of the factual background, see Maurice Cranston, *The Noble Savage: Jean-Jacques Rousseau 1754-1762* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 128-37. The subtleties and difficulties presented by Rousseau's use of personal elements in his writings, here and elsewhere, raise a myriad of interesting questions that I will not attempt to pursue in this article.

enlightenment.<sup>6</sup> D'Alembert singled out the Genevan clergy for special praise, suggesting that they had largely jettisoned both political ambition and the superstitious elements of Christianity.<sup>7</sup> All in all, D'Alembert intimated, an admirable small model of what other European nations could aspire to become if the priests and the princes could ever be dislodged from their pernicious grip on power.

Rousseau—who had himself contributed articles to the *Encyclopedia* and long been friendly with its editors, including D'Alembert—found amidst all this praise a mortal threat to the happy institutions that the article described. In what an ordinary reader might have seen as a peripheral and casual recommendation, D'Alembert suggested that Geneva could become even more

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<sup>6</sup> “Geneva,” in *Lettre de M. D’Alembert à M. J.-J. Rousseau sur l’article “Genève” tiré du septième volume de l’Encyclopédie Avec quelques autres pièces qui y sont relatives* (Amsterdam: Zacharie Chatelain & fils, 1759) [hereafter cited as “*Geneva Collection*”], 1-40. An English translation of D'Alembert's “Geneva” is available in *Collected Works of Rousseau*, ed. Masters & Kelly, vol. 10, 239-49, and in Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Politics and the Arts: Letter to D’Alembert on the Theatre*, ed. & trans. Allan Bloom (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1960), 139-48.

<sup>7</sup> D'Alembert praised the “many” Genevan clergy who reject the divinity of Jesus, the existence of Hell, and all things called mysteries. In his somewhat intricate response to this allegation of deism, Rousseau argues that D'Alembert is either speculating that the pastors are heretics or betraying their confidences (*Letter to D’Alembert*, O.C. V, 9-15). In response to Rousseau's criticism, D'Alembert denied that he had betrayed any confidences, and maintained that his claims were based on public statements by Genevan pastors (“Letter to Rousseau” in *Geneva Collection*, 150-56). Whether or not D'Alembert's speculations or inferences were supported by the public record, the Genevan clergy repudiated the claims he had made about their beliefs (“Declaration of the Pastors of Geneva” in *ibid.*, 41-60).

The most striking feature of Rousseau's criticism of D'Alembert lies in what is missing. Rousseau does not criticize the beliefs attributed to the clergy by D'Alembert, nor does he defend the clergy against the charge of having adopted them. Nowhere does Rousseau imply that he disbelieves what D'Alembert said or that he thinks that such heresies and hypocrisies on the part of the pastors would be pernicious. Later in the *Letter*, Rousseau mentions that he has abandoned his own long-held opinion that virtue can do without the support of religion, leaving the reader to wonder about the reasons for both his previous and current views (O.C. V, 97 note \*). In later writings, of course, he had more to say about all this. See, for example, the long footnote appended near the end of the “Profession of Faith of the Savoyard Vicar” (*Emile*, O.C. IV, 632-35 note \*).

agreeable a place if a theater were established there. In his view, the major obstacle was the Genevans' fear that a company of dissolute actors would corrupt the youth, but he thought this could be avoided by strict regulation of their behavior. A good theater would refine the atmosphere of the city, improve the tastes of the citizens, and promote the cultivation of civilizing literature: "Geneva would combine the sagacity of Lacedaemon with the refinement of Athens."<sup>8</sup>

Rousseau was horrified. In a lengthy open letter to D'Alembert, he attacked this proposal from virtually every angle. The actors would indeed have a corrupting effect, he thought, and one that regulations would be powerless to prevent. But this was only one of a series of objections, which ranged from the narrowly economic to the profoundly moral and political. Rousseau marshals so many different arguments, and so well, that one wonders how a public spirited Genevan could have failed to find at least one of them dispositive. The *Letter* is an extraordinary piece of political advocacy, and was apparently an effective one.<sup>9</sup>

The occasion for the *Letter* was dramatically different from the context in which Plato wrote. Plato's philosophic fiction takes a form that is utterly different from Rousseau's polemical contribution to a live political debate. The city of Plato's *Laws*, moreover, is to be populated with insular Dorians, while Geneva is a modern commercial city in the center of an increasingly cosmopolitan civilization. Greek polytheism, which seems to have lacked what we would call a coherent theology,<sup>10</sup> strongly contrasts with eighteenth

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<sup>8</sup> *Letter to D'Alembert*, O.C. V, 4 (quoting D'Alembert's "Geneva").

<sup>9</sup> See Cranston, *The Noble Savage*, 137 & 148. D'Alembert himself expressed a high opinion of the *Letter*, and actively promoted its publication, which suggests something about the quality of Rousseau's polemic and of D'Alembert's character (*ibid.*, 135).

<sup>10</sup> For an overview of Greek religion as it was practiced, which emphasizes the disconnect between this religion and the poets' stories about the gods, see Jon D.

century Calvinism, the product of a rich heritage of theological disputes that often had complicated political ramifications.

All these differences were bound to affect how Rousseau used what he had seen in Plato's *Laws*, but there is one more that I think has a special significance. Kleinias is to participate in the establishment of a new city with new laws, which gives the Athenian Stranger an opportunity to propose radical reforms informed by an understanding of the impossibly beautiful city of the *Republic*. Even if it is too much to hope that the Athenian Stranger's Magnesia will be more than a third-best city,<sup>11</sup> Kleinias' project justifies a most serious and wide-ranging investigation of the possibilities and limitations of political reform.<sup>12</sup>

Rousseau is faced with an almost diametrically opposite situation. However Geneva arrived at its present condition, Rousseau believes that its current institutions promote both individual happiness and civic friendship to a degree remarkable in the modern world. Rousseau is under no illusion that "we will see Sparta reborn in the bosom of commerce and the love of gain,"<sup>13</sup> and his goal is to preserve and defend what Geneva has achieved. Whether detached reflection would regard this as a third-best city or a fourth- or fourteenth-best, it is this Geneva with which Rousseau is concerned. His goal is conservation, not radical reform.

In light of these differences, it is striking how many echoes of Plato one finds in the *Letter to D'Alembert*. The most obvious, of course, is the detailed analysis of the moral and political effects of the theater. Rousseau includes a lengthy quotation, in Latin, from

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Mikalson, *Ancient Greek Religion* (West Sussex, U.K.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2nd ed. 2010).

<sup>11</sup> See Plato *Laws*, 739e2-5.

<sup>12</sup> Among many indications that the Athenian Stranger means to convey an understanding of political reform that has applications beyond the immediate task facing Kleinias, see *Laws* 736c-737b.

<sup>13</sup> *Letter to D'Alembert*, O.C. V, 61.

Book III of the *Republic*, where Socrates closes his city to poets who offer imitations of anything except the rather austere models set down as fitting earlier in the dialogue.<sup>14</sup> More generally, Rousseau's analysis of the corrupting effects that dramatic spectacles can have on those who view them, and the need to combat such effects through legal regulation, manifestly owes a great deal to Plato. Rousseau develops this Platonic theme as it applies to Geneva—although he leaves aside many issues raised in the *Republic* and the *Laws*, the influence of those dialogues is easily visible.<sup>15</sup>

Less strikingly, but no less significantly, the *Letter to D'Alembert* contains important echoes of the Stranger's analysis of the relations between men and women. On its face, the *Letter* seems to offer recommendations about the education of women that are almost the opposite of the Stranger's, for they resemble the Athenian alternative that was mentioned and implicitly rejected in the *Laws* (805e). The Stranger, however, does not explain what, if anything, is inherently wrong with the Athenian model, focusing instead on his rejection of the Spartan practice of leaving the female to live in a self-indulgent and disorderly way "while managing the male" (806c5).

This passage does imply that the Stranger would not replace Dorian customs with those of the Athenians. But it leaves open the possibility that if he were advising a legislator who was offered the

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 109 note \*.

<sup>15</sup> While working on the *Letter*, Rousseau wrote a kind of commentary on Plato's critique of the imitative arts (*On Theatrical Imitation*, O.C. V, 1195-1211). For useful and provocative treatments of Rousseau's intention in this writing, see Leonard R. Sorenson, "Rousseau's Socratism: The Political Bearing of 'On Theatrical Imitation,'" *Interpretation* 20 (Winter, 1992-1993): 135-55; Pamela K. Jensen, "The Quarrel Between Philosophy and Poetry Reconsidered: Rousseau's 'On Theatrical Imitation,'" in *Rousseau and Criticism*, ed. Lorraine Clark & Guy Lafrance (Ottawa: North American Ass'n for the Study of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 1995), 183-94. For my own thoughts on *Theatrical Imitation*, which are somewhat different, see Note I at the end of this article (pages 36-43).

opportunity to improve on Athenian laws, rather than Knossian laws, his recommendations might differ significantly from those found in the *Laws*.

In the *Letter to D'Alembert*, Rousseau takes up the task of giving advice about laws to a people whose existing customs resemble those of Athens more than those of Crete or Sparta. The superficial dissimilarities between the Stranger's recommendations and Rousseau's do not imply that Rousseau rejected Plato's teaching, or misunderstood it. Rather, Rousseau might have concluded, as I believe he did, that Genevan women are already receiving an education that is conducive to combining individual happiness and civic harmony in a modern bourgeois republic.<sup>16</sup> The task he gives himself is to defend that education on the basis of a philosophically informed analysis against the false philosophy of D'Alembert and the Encyclopedists.

Knowing, as the Athenian Stranger maintains, that sexual passion is an especially dangerous natural source of threats to social harmony and individual happiness,<sup>17</sup> Rousseau views Geneva's stable, bourgeois family life as a fragile institution. In the circumstances in which Geneva finds itself, the great danger is not that women will be neglected by excessively manly men. Rather, the danger is that men will be unmanned by giving women excessive and inappropriate attention, to the disadvantage of both sexes. This danger is not just theoretical or abstract. It has a face, and that face is Parisian society.

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<sup>16</sup> Rousseau does not describe that education, in part perhaps because describing it *as an education* might tend to undermine its effectiveness. From what he does say about life in Geneva, I believe we can infer that girls were generally raised to expect that their lives should be centered around their roles as wives, mothers, and caretakers of the household, and to accept this as the natural order of things.

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, *Laws*, 782d10-783b1.

### *Happy Families*

Although Rousseau's Geneva is a commercial town, open to the world and filled with the spirit of industry, it has sumptuary laws designed to counteract the natural effects of the passion for accumulating honor through wealth. Immediately before proposing the establishment of a theater, D'Alembert himself had approved these laws, especially because they contributed to a profusion of "happy marriages," and discouraged the citizens from trying to avoid the expense that comes with having large broods of children.<sup>18</sup> Even if Rousseau had thought that the dissolute behavior associated with actors and actresses could be controlled through legal regulations, which he does not, the theater would still be a dagger aimed at the heart of the bourgeois family life that D'Alembert had so heartily praised.

The theater that D'Alembert wants Geneva to have will inevitably be that of Paris.<sup>19</sup> In that theater, love is always the central preoccupation, and love is the realm in which the tastes of women rule. Rousseau develops this thought down to its fundamental basis and up through its political ramifications. Like most of the Athenian Stranger's discourse with his Dorian

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<sup>18</sup> "There is perhaps no city where there are more happy marriages; Geneva is on this point two hundred years ahead of our *mœurs*. The regulations against luxury prevent the fear of having many children; thus luxury is not, as in France, one of the great obstacles to population" (D'Alembert's "Geneva," in *Geneva Collection*, 20-21). A similar insight was part of what lay behind the Athenian Stranger's wish to discourage the "profit and ease" associated with bachelorhood, and Rousseau would later treat a high birthrate as the surest sign of civic health. See the discussion of the Stranger's "first law" in Nelson Lund, "Greatness of Soul and the Souls of Women: Plato's *Laws* as an Introduction to Rousseau's *Letter to D'Alembert*," 219-21, and Rousseau, *Social Contract*, book III, ch. 9, *O.C.* III, 419-20.

<sup>19</sup> Rousseau asks whether plays appropriate for Geneva might be written by Genevan dramatists. While acknowledging the possibility of such a thing in principle, he concludes that it is almost certain not to occur (*Letter to D'Alembert*, *O.C.* V, 109-11).



interlocutors, Rousseau's arguments are bounded and shaped by his practical purpose.<sup>20</sup> They are for all that precise, subtle, and powerful.

Except for a passing reference to the ambiguous thesis of man's natural goodness,<sup>21</sup> the radical anthropology of the *Discourse on Inequality* makes no appearance in the *Letter to D'Alembert*. In place of the solitary and speechless animal of the forests, or the happy savages content with rustic huts and the gentle pleasures of independent dealings among themselves, we get a portrait of human nature dominated by the love of the morally beautiful.<sup>22</sup> Instead of random and casual sexual encounters between free and equal men and women, we are now told that men are made to be the sexual aggressors, that feminine shame and modesty are the voice of nature, and that a woman's voluntary submission to a man is nature's way.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Leo Strauss characterizes the Stranger's arguments up through most of Book XII as "sub-Socratic" [*The Argument and the Action of Plato's Laws* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1975), 182]. By "sub-Socratic," Strauss does not mean unphilosophic (see *ibid.*, 129, where he calls Book X "the most philosophic, the only philosophic part of the *Laws*"). Whatever Strauss may have in mind, Rousseau's arguments are both non-Socratic and philosophically informed.

<sup>21</sup> "[M]an is born good, I think it and believe that I have proved it" (*Letter to D'Alembert*, O.C. V, 22). No such proof is offered in the *Letter*, and Rousseau is manifestly alluding to a writing he had already published.

<sup>22</sup> Compare *Discourse on Inequality*, O.C. III, 159-60 and 171 with *Letter to D'Alembert*, O.C. V, 22 & note \*.

<sup>23</sup> Compare *Discourse on Inequality*, O.C. III, 158 with *Letter to D'Alembert*, O.C. V, 77-78. The *Discourse on Inequality's* discussion of sexual relations in what Rousseau calls "the pure state of nature" treats sexual desire as a peripheral part of human experience, much as Socrates does in the *Republic*. Like the *Laws*, the *Letter to D'Alembert* restores this passion to the central place that it must assume in a more complete understanding of politics. For some suggestions about the basis laid for this restoration in the *Discourse* itself, see Nelson Lund, "Philosophic Anthropology in Rousseau and Elizabeth Marshall Thomas," in *Apples of Gold in Pictures of Silver: Honoring the Work of Leon R. Kass*, eds. Yuval Levin, Thomas W. Merrill, & Adam Schulman (Lanham, Md.: Roman & Littlefield, 2010), especially pp. 127, 137 note 51, 151.

Rousseau recognizes that he must respond to the claim—common among the sophisticates of his time and ours—that sexual desire is equally strong in both sexes, that its satisfaction is normal and harmless, and that feminine shame and modesty is a social invention designed for the benefit of men.<sup>24</sup> He offers two counterarguments based on nature. First, sexual shame is a natural safeguard that inclines humans to conceal themselves while coupling in order to reduce their vulnerability to attacks during a time of weakness and distraction, much as nature inclines us to sleep during the night and moves animals to hide themselves when they are sick or injured.<sup>25</sup> Second, men cannot perform without being aroused, and they need to encounter a certain reluctance from women in order to avoid the “boring freedom” (*ennuyeuse liberté*) that would frustrate nature’s procreative purpose.<sup>26</sup>

Apart from their inconsistency with the *Discourse on Inequality*, these arguments from nature are transparently deficient. Accordingly, Rousseau immediately substitutes a very different argument. In response to the fundamental objection that sexual desire is equally natural and naturally equal in men and women, Rousseau screams: “As if the consequences were the same on both sides! As if all the austere duties of the woman were not derived from this *alone*, that a child ought to have a father!”<sup>27</sup> Having presented this genuinely plausible reason for socially imposed constraints on natural inclinations, he then seems to rest his case on the dogmatic claim that women display shame and modesty because

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<sup>24</sup> *Letter to D’Alembert*, O.C. V, 76.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 76-77

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 77-78 (emphasis added). For a useful discussion of the different ways in which the term “nature” is used in the *Discourse on Inequality* and the *Letter to D’Alembert*, see Joel Schwartz, *The Sexual Politics of Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 33-40.

“[n]ature wanted it so, and it would be a crime to stifle her voice.”<sup>28</sup> Rhetorically, nature gets the first and last word, but Rousseau’s true argument is that stable families require that nature be overcome or refashioned.

In the following pages, Rousseau confirms that this is his argument. He begins with some amusing exaggerations of the physical softness and natural timidity of women, and with a manifestly fallacious argument that the modest women of the Swiss mountains must be more natural than the brazen ladies of Paris because they have less education. Then he rather belatedly concedes that examples drawn from the beasts prove nothing because “the holy image of the honorable and the beautiful enters only the heart of man.”<sup>29</sup> In an effort to blur the issue, however, he next points out that some animals do in fact have instincts that lead them to behave rather as he contends humans should act.<sup>30</sup> The mating behavior of pigeons, which Rousseau lovingly describes, obviously proves no more than the very different behavior of dogs and cats, and he now declares again that nature’s voice is not dispositive. “If the timidity, *pudeur*,<sup>31</sup> and modesty that are proper to them are social inventions, it matters to society that women acquire these qualities.”<sup>32</sup>

Much of the *Letter* is devoted to exploring the ways in which the introduction of a theater into Geneva would undermine the family, and to shoring up that fundamental institution by defending social inventions on which it depends.

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<sup>28</sup> *Letter to D’Alembert*, O.C. V, 78. Rousseau reinforces the implication that his real argument is not based on nature’s voice by dropping a long and eloquent footnote distinguishing appropriate male boldness from insolence and brutality.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 79-80.

<sup>31</sup> This word refers to sexual bashfulness, and especially the exhibition of this sentiment.

<sup>32</sup> *Letter to D’Alembert*, O.C. V, 80.

### *Unhappy Lovers*

The central underlying thesis of the *Letter* is “that there are no good *mœurs*<sup>33</sup> for women outside a withdrawn and domestic life; . . . that the quiet cares of the family and the household are their portion, that the dignity of their Sex is in their modesty, that shame and *pudeur* are in them inseparable from respectability (*honnêteté*).”<sup>34</sup> As we have seen, Rousseau can find this proposition in nature only by blurring the distinction between what is natural and what is useful in political societies. Despite his hyperbole in appealing to “the unanimous voice of the human race,”<sup>35</sup> moreover, Rousseau cannot and does not believe that such *mœurs* are so widely accepted as to have acquired quasi-natural status (like, say, the incest prohibition).<sup>36</sup> Instead, he adopts the assumption that families of the bourgeois type foster the optimal mix of individual happiness and social cohesion.

That assumption is completely reasonable in the context of the *Letter*’s immediate purpose because it is one shared by the Genevan laws and by D’Alembert himself.<sup>37</sup> Accordingly, Rousseau’s arguments are devoted to showing how the roles of men and women can best be structured to foster bourgeois family life. The central

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<sup>33</sup> This word refers to customs or habits that have some kind of ethical or moral quality or effect.

<sup>34</sup> *Letter to D’Alembert*, O.C. V, 75-76.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>36</sup> Perhaps the most significant exception for Rousseau was Sparta. “If the [northern] Barbarians of whom I just spoke lived with women, they nevertheless did not live like them; it was the women who had the courage to live like them, just as the Spartan women did. The woman made herself robust, and the man was not enervated” (*ibid.*, 94). Sparta (especially as it is described by Plutarch) is almost always Rousseau’s exemplar of achievable civic excellence (see, for example, *ibid.*, 122), but Rousseau also discreetly alludes in passing to the reputation Spartan women had for sexual promiscuity (*ibid.* 81-82).

<sup>37</sup> Rousseau’s description of mankind’s happiest state in the *Discourse on Inequality* (O.C. III, 169-71) is conspicuously silent about the optimal structure of family life, and he notoriously did not conclude that his own happiness called for him to become a traditional paterfamilias.

proposition to which the arguments lead is that these roles must be differentiated, with men assuming a bolder and more publicly active way of life. Rousseau uses his extended attack on the Parisian theater to explore the effects of apparent social equality between the sexes, which he contends is tantamount to actual female dominance.

Rousseau agrees with D'Alembert that Geneva approaches the ideal polity toward which liberal or Enlightenment principles point. Its citizens are industrious and peaceable. The city has no hereditary nobility or massive inequalities of wealth. The clergy are tolerant and respectful of secular authority. And, as D'Alembert had stressed, Genevan families are stable and fecund. But Rousseau emphatically does not believe that these happy features have been *caused* by the writings or theories of Hobbes, Locke, or the French *philosophes*. On the contrary, Geneva's happiness is largely the product of chance factors, including its geographic position, its soil and climate, and accidents of history.<sup>38</sup> Those factors have established the *mœurs* that give Geneva its distinctiveness, and those *mœurs* are in considerable tension with the sophistication of Parisian society and the philosophers, including of course Rousseau himself.

D'Alembert made the characteristic intellectual's error of overestimating the political power of reason, and so of believing that Geneva could "combine the sagacity of Lacedaemon with the refinement of Athens."<sup>39</sup> The *Laws* makes clear just how difficult

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<sup>38</sup> *Letter to D'Alembert*, O.C. V, 68. One such accident, the political genius of Calvin, is passed over in silence, though Rousseau comments on it elsewhere (*Social Contract*, O.C. III, 382 note \*). At least one reason for the omission of this factor in the *Letter* may be that a discussion of Calvin here would invite a discussion of the relation between Calvin's political and theological thought. Rousseau's rebuke of D'Alembert for describing the theological views of the Genevan clergy suggests that he believed that no good could come of discussing this matter openly in the *Letter*.

<sup>39</sup> *Letter to D'Alembert*, O.C. V, 4 (quoting D'Alembert's "Geneva").

and perilous such a project would be, even under the most favorable of circumstances. Geneva, moreover, is no Sparta and Paris is no Athens. Geneva is more like Republican Rome and Paris more like the Roman Empire, by which I mean that Parisian society is just what Geneva could easily degenerate into. And a theater, Rousseau argues, is just what could accelerate that degeneration.

Introducing a theater into Geneva would destabilize Genevan family life in multiple ways, but above all by publicly and excessively glorifying romantic love. That glorification, whether it comes through the theater or from other sources, is the great threat to Geneva's domestic *mœurs*. Unlike countless moralizers and fretful parents through the ages, Rousseau does not take the easy path of denouncing the kind of public art, mediocre at best, that must have filled the theaters of France, as it does the airwaves and internet servers of modern America. Instead, he sets out to show that even the very best art produced by the geniuses of a great civilization can be at least as dangerous as the vacuous fare that no sapient adult would seek to defend on its merits.

Beginning with tragedy, Rousseau denies that it can perform a useful social function. All public entertainments must please the audience if they are to have any effect at all, and overtly didactic dramas will not give pleasure to anyone who needs its lessons. Generally speaking, therefore, public art can only reinforce existing *mœurs*. Tragedies, in any event, portray gigantic characters who inhabit a distant world. A talented artist can easily make the audience sympathize with a virtuous hero, but such sympathy is a costless emotion, whereas an effort to achieve heroism—or even to act on one's sympathies for heroes—would require real effort and self-denial outside the theater. The heroes of the tragedies, moreover, are so alien in so many ways that their depiction cannot even point the audience toward admiration for the more pedestrian

virtues that can actually be cultivated in modern societies. At best, then, such performances are morally useless. And when one adds the ease with which playwrights can and do make us sympathize even with execrable heroes, little or nothing is left of the hope that popular tragedies could improve the *mœurs* of any modern people.

If this were all, perhaps such entertainment would not be much more than one of a thousand distractions from more useful pursuits. Unfortunately, Rousseau maintains, tragedies can have one very big and bad effect on their audiences. By portraying love and love affairs in the monumental style of the tragic theater, the artist plays on a very natural and highly flammable passion. In that way, these spectacles induce an emotional experience that can indeed affect the way that ordinary people live their ordinary lives.

Rousseau develops this point with two examples, Racine's *Bérénice* and Voltaire's *Zaïre*. It so happens that the plots of these plays resemble the plots of two of Shakespeare's dramas, which are more familiar to us and are thus perhaps especially useful illustrations.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, if Rousseau's critique can fairly be applied to the works of a dramatist who is a greater genius than either of the French playwrights, that would confirm his claim that the best tragedies can have the worst effects. Here is how I think Rousseau would have seen our English analogues to *Bérénice* and *Zaïre*.

Consider *Antony and Cleopatra* first, beginning with its well-known plot. During the factional struggles after the destruction of the Republic, Mark Antony followed the elder Pompey and Julius Caesar to Egypt and the bed of the world's greatest seductress. Unfortunately, Antony encounters repeated conflicts between this

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<sup>40</sup> In *Bérénice*, Titus must choose between marrying the queen of Palestine, with whom he is in love, and remaining the emperor of Rome. *Zaïre* presents the story of a Christian slave with whom the Sultan of Jerusalem falls in love, and whom the Sultan eventually murders because of an imagined infidelity.

liaison and his Roman duties and ambitions. He gets a lucky break when his wife dies, as he had wished she would, but soon finds it politically expedient to marry the sister of one of his political rivals, Octavius Caesar. Unwilling to abandon Cleopatra, however, Antony attempts to compete in Roman politics while living in Egypt with his paramour. The cool and prudent Octavius, whose sister has been dishonored, lures Antony into a sea battle in which Caesar has the advantage. Compounding his mistake, Antony allows Cleopatra to accompany him at the head of her own fleet. During the battle, Cleopatra loses her nerve and flees, with Antony chasing after her. Faced eventually with the inevitability of Caesar's triumph, Antony commits a clumsy suicide after failing to persuade one of his men to assist him. Cleopatra enters into negotiations with Caesar, hoping to retain her throne at least in name, but learns that Caesar means to display her as a prize in Rome. She kills herself, and Egypt is absorbed into the Roman Empire, of which Octavius is now the unchallenged ruler.

Anyone who has seen or read the play will instantly recognize how misleading this summary is. Thanks to the speeches that Shakespeare gives his characters, what we see on stage is among the great love stories in Western literature. Cleopatra is presented, unforgettably, as a woman who could rival or surpass Rome itself as an object of a great man's preoccupation. When a Roman soldier who has never seen Cleopatra remarks that political necessities will require Antony to leave her, the perceptive Enobarbus declares:

Never! He will not.  
Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale  
Her infinite variety. Other women cloy  
The appetites they feed, but she makes hungry  
Where most she satisfies; for vilest things



Become themselves in her, that the holy priests  
Bless her when she is riggish.<sup>41</sup>

Antony, for his part, is transformed by his love for Cleopatra from a Roman larger than life to a spirit larger than the pedestrian world itself. After his death, Cleopatra tells Dolabella what he became through her:

His face was as the heavens, and therein stuck  
A sun and moon which kept their course and lighted  
The little O, the earth . . .  
His legs bestrid the ocean; his reared arm  
Crested the world; his voice was propertied  
As all the tuned spheres, and that to friends;  
But when he meant to quail and shake the orb,  
He was as rattling thunder. For his bounty,  
There was no winter in't; an autumn it was  
That grew the more by reaping. His delights  
Were dolphin-like: they showed his back above  
The element they lived in. In his livery  
Walked crowns and crownets; realms and islands were  
As plates dropped from his pocket.<sup>42</sup>

Cleopatra herself calls this a dream, but it is one so powerful that it induces Dolabella to betray his leader and tell the conquered Cleopatra the truth about Caesar's plans for her. Tellingly, Antony warned Cleopatra to trust none of Caesar's men but Proculeius—and when she tells him what Antony had said, Proculeius lies to her. Her interview with Dolabella comes afterward, and her dream accomplishes what Proculeius' memory of the living Antony could not.

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<sup>41</sup> Act II, sc. 2, ll. 244-50 (all citations are to the Arden Shakespeare.) When Antony tells Enobarbus that he wishes he had never met the queen, Enobarbus disagrees: "O, Sir, you had then left unseen a wonderful piece of work, which not to have been blest withal would have discredited your travel" (Act I, sc. 2, ll.160-62). Enobarbus surely knows that Antony agrees, and he probably hopes that Antony will come to be satisfied with *having* seen Cleopatra, who is deeply threatening to Antony's self-interest and his own.

<sup>42</sup> Act V, sc. 2, ll.78-91.

Sustained reflection on the play in all its complex detail would lead well beyond what one might expect either from the plot summary or from Shakespeare's dazzling spectacle of immortal longings, a lass unparalleled, a Roman by a Roman valiantly vanquished, and a world where 'tis paltry to be Caesar, who not being Fortune is but Fortune's knave. But what effects would this play have on an ordinary audience, and especially its younger members?

Often, no doubt, not much. But what about a sensitive and restless young woman, raised in a small town, and aware of the attention she has begun to draw from boys? She won't think of becoming an actual queen, or that amorous adventures will lead to her doom. But Cleopatra can fill her with lots of ideas of what to look for in a relationship, and how to seek it. If she's reasonably attractive, there will be no shortage of obliging young men, though probably none who finds that custom cannot stale her infinite variety. Few boys are likely to find the Antony of this play very interesting or admirable, but all will want to enchant a fetching girl, and some will be enchanted. It won't be hard to say, and sometimes feel, that "the nobleness of life/Is to do thus, when such a mutual pair/And such a twain can do't."<sup>43</sup>

One play, of course, would hardly ever alter one person's life, let alone corrupt the *mœurs* of a whole community. But let the extraordinary power of the poetry in *Antony and Cleopatra* come atop a diet of mediocre dramas in which romance is glorified and civic life deprecated, where great heroes have great affairs, where every member of the audience is made to identify for a moment with doomed lovers. All of this may be harmless amusement in the cosmopolitan atmosphere of a great metropolis, and Shakespeare's art is easily redeemed there by the pleasure he provides to all and

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<sup>43</sup> Act 1, sc. 1, ll. 37-39.

the subtleties he offers for those who can attend to them. But what exactly would this do for the children of a city like Rousseau's Geneva? It might encourage some to flee to Paris, hoping perhaps to find that one great love, or at least a larger stage on which to make the search. Others might stay, marry, and raise an ordinary family, but with a nagging dissatisfaction and a heightened sense of possibilities foregone. Not a promising recipe for a happier city and happier families.

Rousseau would see the very genius of *Antony and Cleopatra* as a contributor to the miseducation of women, and a goad to their misuse of their natural power over men. Antony repeatedly senses, and sometimes recognizes, that he loses his Roman nobility in allowing himself to be ruled by his love for Cleopatra. His inability to give her up in favor of Roman duties and aspirations is in significant part a consequence of the instability in Roman *mœurs* that accompanied the transition from republic to empire.<sup>44</sup> Cleopatra, a non-Roman who does a far better job than Antony at managing the tensions between her loves and her political needs, is also given more beautiful speeches (both by and about her) and a bigger place in the hearts of the audience.<sup>45</sup> She overshadows

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<sup>44</sup> For a detailed and thoughtful analysis of the relationship between the instability in Rome and the instability in the relationship between Antony and Cleopatra, see Paul A. Cantor, *Shakespeare's Rome: Republic and Empire* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1976).

<sup>45</sup> As a monarch ruling in the shadow of Roman hegemony, Cleopatra had effectively employed sexual diplomacy with the elder Pompey and Julius Caesar. When reminded of how she had once talked about this Caesar, she waves it off as the stuff of "My salad days,/When I was green in judgment, cold in blood" (Act I, sc. 5, ll.76-77). But her alliance with Antony was not at all a bad political bet. He was militarily the strongest of the Roman rivals, and it actually took a series of very foolish mistakes on his part to lose out to Octavius. Had she been more schooled in Roman affairs, and more ruthless, Cleopatra might have managed Antony much better than she did. One can wonder whether she was more deficient in ruthlessness or in prudence, and one can wonder whether Antony would have fallen for her so completely if she were less deficient. In any event, until all hope was gone Cleopatra did keep looking for a way to save her crown and

Antony, who is attractive primarily because of the way he is attracted to her.<sup>46</sup> It is she who would be a real threat to Genevan *mœurs*.

Perhaps *Antony and Cleopatra* is a little too easy an example to use in support of Rousseau's argument. Might *Othello* be a counterexample? Desdemona is an anti-Cleopatra. She is pure womanly virtue, devoted and completely faithful to her husband. She erects no obstacles to Othello's performing his civic duties, even as she accompanies him to war.<sup>47</sup> So far is she from Cleopatra's sexual voracity that she saw Othello's visage in his mind, falling in love with the man she knew from what he said about how he had lived. Fittingly, Othello is an anti-Antony. Cleopatra's lover is a dissatisfied aristocratic leftover in the new, decadent Rome. Othello is an immigrant, and a self-made man who rose quickly in Venice through his talents, his virtue, and fidelity to his adopted home.

The action of the play arises from Iago's campaign—apparently triggered by professional or sexual jealousy—to destroy this glorious marriage by tricking Othello into a jealous fury over his wife's imagined adultery.<sup>48</sup> Iago's campaign succeeds, and Othello

her life, and to pass the throne to one of her sons—presumably Julius Caesar's child, not one of Antony's.

<sup>46</sup> If Octavius looks contemptible compared with Antony, it is mainly because he is impervious to Cleopatra's charm. The only characters who appear more contemptible are Lepidus, who ineffectually seeks to foster civic friendship, and the younger Pompey, who anachronistically and inconsistently struggles to maintain the old ideals of Roman virtue. The youth of Geneva would hardly benefit from juxtapositions like these.

<sup>47</sup> Desdemona accompanies Othello as his wife. It is inconceivable that she would actually participate in war, either incompetently like Cleopatra or independently like Fulvia.

<sup>48</sup> As the play opens, Iago tells Roderigo that he hates Othello because he gave Cassio an undeserved military promotion that Iago thought should have been his (Act I, sc. 1, ll. 7-65). In subsequent soliloquies, which are presumably more candid, Iago attributes his hatred to rumors or suspicions that he has been cuckolded by Othello (Act I, sc. 3, ll. 384-88; Act II, sc. 1, ll. 290-93). There are no other indications in the play that Iago deserved the promotion or that his wife had been unfaithful (or even that she had been rumored to have been). Because Iago, "for mere suspicion in that kind,/Will do, as if for surety," we have to suspect that he himself does not fully recognize the sources of his hatred for Othello.

kills Desdemona, who endures her murder with the grace of an angel. When he learns the truth, Othello has no more defense than to call himself “one that lov’d not wisely, but too well.”<sup>49</sup> He pronounces a just verdict on himself and speaks his last words to his wife’s corpse: “I kiss’d thee ere I kill’d thee, no way but this,/Killing myself, to die upon a kiss.”<sup>50</sup>

Hard to see any pernicious lessons lurking here. As Rousseau notes in his discussion of *Zaire*, however, no one who sees such a spectacle can come away more disposed toward the moderate love on which happy families are generally founded.<sup>51</sup> One might well think: “Ah! Let me be given [such a woman]; I will well ensure that I do not kill her.”<sup>52</sup> But Rousseau believes that the audience most of all wants a woman who can inspire the towering passion that an Othello exhibits.<sup>53</sup>

Where would you find such a woman, and how would you go about securing her love if you did? Othello is an exotic in ways more profound than his place of birth, the color of his skin, or the religion in which he was presumably raised. For her part, Desdemona is

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<sup>49</sup> Act V, sc. 2, l. 345.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, ll. 359-60.

<sup>51</sup> As Mera J. Flaumenhaft points out, it is somewhat difficult to imagine Othello and Desdemona as successful parents [“Begetting and Belonging in Shakespeare’s *Othello*,” *Interpretation* 4 (Spring 1975): 197, 210-12].

<sup>52</sup> *Letter to D’Alembert*, O.C. V, 51.

<sup>53</sup> Rousseau dismisses the popular and superficially appealing theory that tragedy provides a healthy catharsis of dangerous passions. Only reason can purge the passions, and reason has no effect in the theater (*ibid.*, 20). It may well be that tragedy leads to pity through fear, but this pity is only a temporary and vain emotion (*ibid.*, 23). And perhaps most persuasively:

It is pretended that we are cured of love by the depiction of its weaknesses. . . . [B]ut I see that the spectators always take the part of the weak lover, and that they are often vexed that he is not more so. I ask: is this a great way to avoid resembling him? (*Ibid.*, 48)

Rousseau is well aware of Aristotle’s *Poetics*, which he quotes with approval in a different context (*ibid.*, 25). But Rousseau argues that tragedy had a distinctive function in Greek political life, where it had far different effects than in our culture (see *ibid.*, 26 note \* & 31).

truly the rarest “gem of women.”<sup>54</sup> What Antony demands—for “the world to weet/We stand up peerless”—might more soberly be granted to Othello and Desdemona. But that is not what the audience wants. Instead, we want to believe that this is what love could be for ourselves. And what it could have continued to be in the play if not for the freakish bad luck of Iago’s overwrought malevolence and daring shrewdness.<sup>55</sup> A great many women, for their part, will watch the death of Desdemona with a certain sanguine composure: “a sensitive woman sees without terror the transports of passion [on the stage]; for it is a lesser misfortune to perish by the hand of her lover than to be weakly loved.”<sup>56</sup>

Rousseau’s general point is that love well depicted overshadows everything that accompanies it, and thereby usurps the place that virtue ought to have. Cleopatra overshadows both

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<sup>54</sup> *Antony and Cleopatra*, Act III, sc. 13, l. 113 (Antony describing Octavia). Rousseau makes this point in the following way:

The most charming object in nature, the one most capable of stirring a sensitive heart and turning it to the good, is, I acknowledge, an amiable and virtuous woman. But where is this celestial object hiding itself? . . . If a young man has seen the world only on the Stage, the first means of pursuing virtue which offers itself to him is to seek a mistress who will conduct him there, quite hoping to find at least a Constance or a Cénie. Thus, on faith in an imaginary model, on a modest and touching appearance, on a counterfeit sweetness, *nescius aurae fallacis* [ignorant of the deceptive breeze], the young madman quickly loses himself while thinking that he is becoming wise. (*Letter to D’Alembert*, O.C. V, 44—footnote omitted)

<sup>55</sup> On this, as on many other points, one’s understanding of the play is apt to change as one gets to know it better. For purposes of understanding Rousseau’s argument, however, the initial impression (especially on the impressionable) is more important.

<sup>56</sup> *Letter to D’Alembert*, O.C. V, 51. Ironically, and fittingly, Rousseau’s writings were a smash hit among the ladies of Paris. According to one of their own number, they “praise him with enthusiasm, although no Author treats them with less respect. . . . [H]e has mentioned them with contempt, but with an air of passion, and passion excuses everything” [Melissa A. Butler, “Eighteenth-Century Critics of Rousseau’s Views on Women,” in *Rousseau and Criticism*, ed. Clark & Lafrance, 133 (quoting Mme. Comtesse de Genlis)]. D’Alembert drew the same conclusion: “[M]any sins are forgiven him because he has loved so much” (ibid., quoting D’Alembert’s “Jugement sur *Emile*”).

Antony, a decayed representative of republican virtue, and Octavius, the emerging embodiment of imperial virtue. Like Cleopatra, Othello gets the most beautiful poetry, and his passion overshadows Desdemona's moderate and virtuous love. Rather than watching captivating characters with whom we fall in love because of their love for each other, "young people should learn to be on guard against the illusions of love, to flee the error arising from a blind propensity that always believes that it is based on respect for merit, and to fear that one will sometimes deliver a virtuous heart over to an object that is unworthy of its cares."<sup>57</sup> Tragedies in their nature simply cannot do that.

Comedy may be able to do it, by ridiculing the madness of love. Unfortunately, comedy debunks virtue just as it does love.<sup>58</sup> Once again taking as his target the best of the genre, Rousseau demonstrates this point in an extended and justly celebrated analysis of Molière's *The Misanthrope*.<sup>59</sup> His key point is that Molière placed a virtuous man in a corrupt society, giving the character just enough shortcomings and inconsistencies to render him fatuously unsociable. In that way, Molière "seduces by an

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<sup>57</sup> *Letter to D'Alembert, O.C. V, 52.*

<sup>58</sup> We can see an example of this even in a blackly comic interlude in *Othello*. Roderigo is so taken with Desdemona that he contemplates suicide after learning of her marriage to Othello. When Iago mocks him, Roderigo confesses that he is ashamed of his infatuation, "but it is not in my virtue to amend it." Iago responds: "Virtue? a fig! . . . But we have reason to cool our raging motions, our carnal stings, our unbitted lusts . . . [and reason will show the way to cuckold Othello, thus enabling you to] doest thyself a pleasure" (Act I, sc. 3, ll. 317-72).

<sup>59</sup> Rousseau appears to believe that his critique of tragedy applies to all tragedy, including ancient plays presented to modern audiences. Although he says that all comedy is "bad and pernicious" (*Letter to D'Alembert, O.C. V, 31*), his evidence is drawn exclusively from the French theater. I have no reason to question Rousseau's claim that even the best French comedies that would be staged in Geneva were all "bad and pernicious," but his broader generalization is questionable. Had Rousseau been familiar with Shakespeare's comedies, which I do not believe he was, he might have qualified his denunciation of all comedy.

appearance of reason.”<sup>60</sup> The audience gets the pleasure of a laugh at virtue’s expense, and is confirmed in the easy lesson that it’s best to get along by going along, “that to be an honorable man (*honnête-homme*) it suffices not to be a downright scoundrel.”<sup>61</sup> The culmination of the playwright’s seduction through sophistry comes with the comically virtuous Alceste’s foolish love: “To make the misanthrope fall in love was nothing; the stroke of genius was to make him fall in love with a coquette.”<sup>62</sup>

Rousseau is perfectly willing to concede that the theater, including both great art and the mediocre productions that must predominate in any form of popular entertainment, may actually have a variety of beneficial effects in a corrupt culture like that of Paris.<sup>63</sup> But he shows just how serious he is in attacking even the greatest art by expressing a preference for the crude and even smutty amusements that are tolerated in Geneva’s marketplace. Although he disapproves of them, he says: “If these insipid entertainments lack taste, so much the better; they will become

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<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.* Ruth W. Grant captures the essential point in the dispute between Molière and Rousseau: they agreed that the *honnête-homme* is the proper model, but Molière had identified this type with the worldly man (*homme du monde*) whereas Rousseau regarded these as opposing alternatives [*Hypocrisy and Integrity: Machiavelli, Rousseau, and the Ethics of Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 92-93].

<sup>62</sup> *Letter to D’Alembert*, *O.C.* V, 52.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 59. He had previously developed this point at somewhat greater length in the “Preface to *Narcisse*” (*O.C.* II, 971-73). In the *Letter*, Rousseau also suggests in passing one art form suitable for a modern bourgeois society: the novel. In the course of offering relations between English men and women as an illustration of the benefits of sharply differentiating between the roles of the sexes, he approves the English taste for contemplative readings and novels (*O.C.* V, 75). In a curious footnote, he says that English novels are, “like the men, sublime or detestable,” and bestows the most extravagant praise on Richardson’s *Clarissa*. The *Letter to D’Alembert* was written and published while Rousseau was completing work on a novel of his own, which he hoped would be unneeded in Geneva but beneficial elsewhere. In that book, one of his characters says: “Novels are perhaps the last form of education left for a people so corrupted that every other would be useless” (*Julie, or the New Heloise*, *O.C.* II, 277).



tiresome more quickly; if they are crude they will be less seductive. Vice hardly insinuates itself by shocking decency, but it does so by taking on its likeness; and dirty words are more opposed to refined manners than to good *mœurs*.”<sup>64</sup>

### *Men Unmanned*

Parisian society shows what Parisian theater will lead to in Geneva: a degenerate form of Athenian refinement *at the expense* of a sagacity somewhat reminiscent of Lacedaemon. Here is life in the salons of Paris, as Rousseau saw it through his Genevan eyes:

[C]ravenly devoted to the wills of the sex that we ought to protect and not serve, we have learned to despise it in obeying it, to insult it by our ironic attentions; and every Parisian woman assembles in her apartment a harem of men more feminine than herself, who know how to render to beauty all sorts of tributes, except the tribute of the heart of which it is worthy. But observe how these same men, always constrained in these voluntary prisons, get up, sit down, go ceaselessly back and forth to the fireplace, to the window, pick up and put down a fire screen<sup>65</sup> a hundred times, leaf through books, run their eyes over some paintings, turn and pirouette about the room, while the idol reposes without moving on her couch, active only with her tongue and her eyes. From where does this difference come unless it is the case that nature, which imposes on women this sedentary and homebound life, prescribes for men the exact opposite, and that this restlessness indicates a true need in them?<sup>66</sup>

A kind of modern Egypt, full of faux Cleopatras and little imitation Antonys who resemble him only in their professions of admiration for the queen and their underlying dissatisfaction with serving her.

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<sup>64</sup> *Letter to D’Alembert*, O.C. V, 113. It would of course be even better if Geneva were rid of these low entertainments, and that the citizens would “draw our pleasures and our duties from our state and from ourselves” (ibid).

<sup>65</sup> In Rousseau’s time, fashionable ladies had a problem dealing with fireplaces, which could melt the makeup on the side of the face that was turned toward the flames. For that reason, they used handheld screens to protect themselves against such a disaster. These screens were made of a variety of materials, and were often artfully decorated.

<sup>66</sup> *Letter to D’Alembert*, O.C. V, 93.

Corresponding to the physical atrophy of Parisian men, Rousseau sees a suppression of male intellectual force. "Given over to these puerile habits, to what that is great could we [men] ever raise ourselves? Our talents and our writings smell of our frivolous occupations, agreeable if one wishes, but small and cold like our sentiments; they have as their whole merit that facile turn that one has no great trouble in giving to nothings."<sup>67</sup>

Rousseau is confident that "instead of gaining by these practices, the women lose," for the obeisance paid them is cynically ironic.<sup>68</sup> The men, for their part, actually lose themselves. The refined manners of Paris are already being aped in Geneva, and the sight is appalling:

It is certain that the boys know how to bow better, that they know how to offer their hand more gallantly to Ladies and to say to them an infinity of genialities for which I myself would have them whipped, that they know how to decide, to interrogate, to interrupt adult conversations, to pester everybody without modesty and without discretion. . . . [T]he only thing the women do not exact from these vile slaves is that they consecrate themselves to their service in the Oriental fashion. Except for this, all that distinguishes them from the women is that, nature having refused them women's graces, they substitute ridiculous affectations. On my last trip to

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 94-95. Rousseau appends to this passage a footnote in which he claims that women are in general bereft of artistic genius. He acknowledges that there are exceptions, but he knows of only two: Sappho and one other whom he does not name. In an effort to provide a kind of proof that he is not just manifesting male chauvinism, Rousseau offers this: "I would wager anything in the world that the *Lettres portugaises* were written by a man" (ibid., 94-95 note \*). Twentieth century scholarship has uncovered strong evidence, though not absolutely conclusive proof, that Rousseau was correct. See, for example, F.C. Green, "Who Was the Author of the *Lettres Portugaises*?" *Modern Language Review* 21, No. 2 (April 1926): 159-67; Charles R. Lefcourt, "Did Guilleragues Write 'The Portuguese Letters'?" *Hispania* 59, No. 3 (Sept. 1976): 493-97; Anna Klobucka, *The Portuguese Nun: Formation of a National Myth* (Lewisburg, Penn.: Bucknell University Press, 2000), 11-15. In any event, Rousseau's point is that men who adopt criteria of literary excellence designed to increase the proportion of women whose work will qualify should be suspected of offering compliments arising more from diffidence than honest admiration.

<sup>68</sup> *Letter to D'Alembert*, O.C. V, 95.

Geneva, I already saw several of these young ladies in tight jackets, with white teeth, plump hands, piping voices, and pretty green parasols in their hands, rather maladroitly counterfeiting men.<sup>69</sup>

### *Republican Entertainments*

As one might anticipate from his contemptuous description of mincing French manners, and from his disapproving remarks about the crude entertainments in the Genevan marketplace, Rousseau must look for a healthy and authentically Genevan alternative to the French theater. He finds it in the small clubs of a dozen-odd men who rent quarters where they can eat, drink, and relax in one another's company, and who sometimes walk or hunt together. Women have similar groups, which meet at one another's homes.<sup>70</sup> These so-called *cercles*, private versions of the segregated common meals in the Athenian Stranger's Magnesia, provide simple and innocent amusements, the kind that fit with republican *mœurs*. Even more important, they provide forums where men can be their masculine selves, without the need to adapt to women's tastes, and women can be relieved from the endless work of bending men to those tastes. "[T]he two sexes should sometimes gather together and should ordinarily live apart. . . . Our *cercles* still preserve among us some image of ancient *mœurs*."<sup>71</sup>

The *cercles* were apparently not the object of universal approbation in Geneva. Along with his praise of what they do well, Rousseau defends even their shortcomings. The women's groups are blamed primarily for gossiping that leads to scandal mongering. Rousseau thinks there may be more good than bad in this feminine

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<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>70</sup> In *The New Heloise*, Rousseau suggests that these institutions had already lost their vitality (*O.C.* II, 269 note \*). In the *Letter to D'Alembert*, Rousseau may have hoped to promote their reinvigoration by affecting not to have noticed their decay.

<sup>71</sup> *Letter to D'Alembert*, *O.C.* V, 92, 96.

vice, which almost performs the office of the ancient censors. It is certainly far better than the Parisian alternative, where ladies can hardly endure the company of other women, and prefer instead to gossip with men.

Rousseau acknowledges that the men's *cercles* have more serious disadvantages, such as drinking and drunkenness. While conceding that excessive drinking degrades the soul, Rousseau emphasizes that it "makes a man stupid, not evil," that its effects are temporary, and that it is actually a sign of social health when men do not "dread a state of indiscretion in which the heart reveals itself without deliberation."<sup>72</sup> In any event, perfect men and perfect cities do not exist, and "[n]ever has a people perished through an excess of wine; all perish through the disorder of women."<sup>73</sup> As the Athenian Stranger's discussions of wine and women confirm, he and Rousseau agree about this proposition, and Rousseau expressly invokes the *Laws* as support for allowing old men to reanimate their spirits with drink.<sup>74</sup>

Later, toward the end of his long response to D'Alembert, Rousseau comes as close as he ever does in the *Letter* to imitating the Athenian Stranger by offering an affirmative reform (in contradistinction to a defense of existing practices). That reform is modeled on one of the Stranger's own proposals.

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<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 99-100.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 109 & note \*. The discussion of drinking and drunkenness in the *Laws* arises from a dispute between the Stranger and Megillus, beginning at 636a, that involves a comparison between the Athenian vice of drinking and Sparta's reputation for male homosexuality and female promiscuity. The Stranger argues that drinking could be put to good use in a well ordered city, a claim that he never makes about pederasty or promiscuity. See also 790a8-b6 (arguing that a stable community depends on the correct legal regulation of private households, as does the happiness of both the household and the city).

After celebrating the Genevans' passion for public festivals and games, which promote civic friendship, and encouraging the establishment of more such events, Rousseau notes that winter in these mountains favors private entertainments. In the one significant innovation that he proposes, Rousseau attacks the scruples and worries that are apparently associated in Geneva with dancing. At some length he insists that if you want to promote happy marriages, the worst way to do it is to prevent young men and women from coming together in public. Instead, Rousseau recommends that elaborate balls be conducted for the express purpose of assisting young people to find appropriate mates. In terms that closely track the Stranger's reasoning on this subject, Rousseau argues that the institution of such balls would make it likelier that marriages would be founded on mutual personal attraction, that they would be less circumscribed by social rank and contribute less to the formation of political factions based on family connections, and that economic inequality would be tempered and the spirit of the political constitution promoted.<sup>75</sup>

By opposing the prudish disapproval of dancing,<sup>76</sup> Rousseau seeks to give nature's most dangerously insistent passion a respectable outlet at just the point in life at which it can determine an individual's fate. The balls, however, are designed with more

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<sup>75</sup> *Letter to D'Alembert*, O.C. V, 119-20. Compare *Laws*, 771e-773e.

<sup>76</sup> Rousseau goes out of his way to anticipate the mocking suggestion that he would even like to revive the Spartan practice of naked dancing by young women. This objection provides him with an opportunity to illustrate the great gulf between Spartan *mœurs* and those of people who are "merely respectable (*honnête*)" (*Letter to D'Alembert*, O.C. V, 122). In this passage, he points out that artful dress is more provocative than absolute nudity and that "I propose for [Genevans] only the Lacedaemonian institutions of which they are not yet incapable." Such praise of Sparta very near the end of the *Letter* may serve to remind us that the Athenian Stranger's reform of Dorian institutions aims at a kind of equality and friendship between men and women that is beyond the reach of Geneva. Perhaps Rousseau wants to leave a hint that he does not regard such relations as inherently unattainable.

than this in mind. In one important respect, Rousseau's proposal is quite different from the Stranger's, and that difference illustrates how Rousseau adapted the teaching of the *Laws* to the circumstances of Geneva.

Adults of all ages are to attend the new balls, but the old and the married will be spectators, and married women in particular will be forbidden to "profane conjugal dignity" by dancing.<sup>77</sup> By spotlighting the young people in this way, Rousseau's rules will offer the girls a regulated opportunity to enjoy the pleasure of displaying themselves in much the same manner that corrupt Parisian women want to parade around throughout their lives. Rousseau goes even farther, and recommends that a Queen of the Ball be elected by the oldest and most honored spectators. The judges are to choose the girl who has behaved "most respectably (*honnêtement*), modestly, and pleasingly to the public" during the preceding year.<sup>78</sup> A public official will bestow the crown, and her parents will be honored for raising her so well. In a particularly clever touch, Rousseau recommends that the girl receive additional honors or emoluments if she marries during the following year.

The girls will inevitably be the focus of these balls, in a way that they would not be in the Magnesian dances. This is what Rousseau wants, and it is not an oversight that there is to be no King of the Ball. In the Geneva that Rousseau seeks to preserve, men will have their whole lives to display themselves publicly, to achieve civic honors, and to enjoy the dignity that comes with the role of head of household. In many ways, women will always rule these men, but they will do it privately and indirectly. Rousseau believes this is desirable, for the sake of everyone's happiness, but he also

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<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>78</sup> Rousseau recognizes without great alarm that even elderly judges may be a little too influenced by the physical beauty of some of the contestants. Better that, perhaps, than that the city breed a bunch of old bourgeois Octaviuses.

recognizes that it does entail a real sacrifice by women. Rousseau's proposed balls reflect a recognition that they should be asked to sacrifice no more than reason demands.

### *Conclusion*

The common ground on which Rousseau and the Athenian Stranger stand emerges from an understanding of the advantages that would arise from giving an appropriate education to "that half of the human race that governs the other."<sup>79</sup> In Magnesia, that requires a more masculine education for women, and a moderation of the masculinity of their men. In Geneva, it means defending bourgeois manliness, and educating women to seek their happiness primarily in their roles as wives and mothers. The differences in the prescriptions, which are striking enough, should not be allowed to conceal the underlying agreement about the fundamental requisites of social life.

It is no doubt true that the *Laws* points toward the cultivation of a kind of virtue, and happiness, to which the Genevans cannot aspire. But it is also true that the Athenian Stranger does not claim to have identified that virtue, or to have shown in any but the vaguest way how the Magnesians might discover it. The women of Magnesia are certainly to be offered the possibility of cultivating their own happiness by serving their city beyond the confines of their families, though only after they have fulfilled their duties as wives and mothers. Plato leaves us to wonder how well this measure of equality between the sexes would work out before the nocturnal council has succeeded in its task of discovering what human virtue truly is. Rousseau appears to have reflected on this question, and

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<sup>79</sup> *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts*, O.C. III, 21 note \* (quoted in context at the beginning of this article).

concluded that it could not work out well at all in modern Europe. And he leaves us to ask whether we have subsequently discovered the solution to a dilemma that he believed was inescapable.

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Rousseau is quite precise and vivid in describing what he regards as sound *mœurs* for Genevan women, and the proper aim of their education. He is less precise and less vivid about men. This is striking when one recalls his early statement: “Men will always be what is pleasing to women: if then you want them to become great and virtuous, teach women what greatness of soul and virtue is.”<sup>80</sup> In the *Letter to D’Alembert*, we are largely left to infer that men should be good providers, faithful husbands, and solid citizens who participate responsibly but not obsessively in republican politics. We are apparently also expected to infer that if women are committed strongly enough to their own functions as wives and mothers, they will be able to discipline their men and keep them happy in this role. One can easily imagine that such a life would be seen as one of virtue, but is it so easy to think it would be regarded as “greatness of soul,” either by men or by women?

For all his focus on bucking up Genevan men, and keeping their women from usurping the place these men should occupy, Rousseau does not forget about male *thumos*, about the desire to be recognized for greatness, or about the dangers of excessive manliness.

In one of the strangest of the many digressions in the *Letter to D’Alembert*, Rousseau discusses the failed efforts of the King of France to outlaw dueling. The occasion, or excuse, for this digression arose from D’Alembert’s assumption that the behavior of a company of actors could be regulated by law and thus prevented

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid. (quoted in context at the beginning of this article).



from corrupting the Genevan youth. Rousseau has any number of reasons for considering this assumption naïve, but his principal objection is that D'Alembert misunderstands the relation between laws and *mœurs*.

“Where is the lowliest legal scholar who cannot draw up a moral code as pure as that of Plato’s laws?”<sup>81</sup> To the extent that laws require coercion for their enforcement, their power is extremely limited. The real challenge is to influence public opinion, as the Athenian Stranger emphasizes through his discussion of preludes, and this is much more difficult than issuing commands and regulations.

Rousseau chooses as an example the tribunal of the Marshals of France, which was established by the King to adjudicate points of honor. The underlying problem is that the conventions of honor, including the duel, are a vestigial residue from a time when martial attitudes and martial skill had been taken for virtue. Whatever useful function such quasi-Dorian traditions may once have served, the conventions are manifestly contrary to reason, for it is absurd to suppose that the justice of one’s claims could be a function of one’s ability to kill an opponent.<sup>82</sup> In a modern society, moreover, the conventions are subversive of the social order. A man’s honor means more to him than the laws of a republic or the commands of a monarch.

So long as men exhibit their natural share of *thumos*, honor will have meaning, and the challenge in France was to detach the convention or prejudice in favor of duels from the underlying natural sentiments that had been channeled into this tradition. Rousseau believes that the French effort to replace duels with the

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<sup>81</sup> *Letter to D'Alembert*, O.C. V, 61.

<sup>82</sup> In the *Laws*, the Stranger rebukes Megillus for thinking that victory in battle necessarily implies anything at all about who deserved to prevail (638a3-b9).

resolution of disputes in a legal tribunal was badly designed in many particulars. But he does not think that the case is completely hopeless.

His first key point is that the tribunals should consist only of respected soldiers, representatives of the tradition of virtue with which dueling is associated,<sup>83</sup> and that the only sanctions available to the judges should be honor and disgrace. Second, the tribunal should have the authority to forbid particular duels, to pass judgment on those who engage in unauthorized combats, and to give advance authorization to some duels. Third, the tribunal should be completely independent of the King's will, and he should even be subject to its judgments. Even if the "laws" administered by the tribunal make no real sense, it is important that the judges be seen as applying the code of honor without arbitrary interferences provoked by the interests or whims of the sovereign. Fourth, the tribunal should be given jurisdiction over insulting speeches in general, not just those involving the social classes in which formal duels have been traditional. Nobles and soldiers fight because others talk, and duels will never be abolished without changing the way everyone talks.

Rousseau thinks that it is crucial at the beginning not to condemn every duelist, and even to authorize some duels before they take place. This would have the effect of legitimating the judgments of the tribunal, and of causing those who dueled in secret to be suspected of doing so for disreputable reasons. Eventually, as the tribunal acquired respectability, it could gradually reduce the number of occasions on which duels would be approved until, perhaps, they could be abolished altogether.

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<sup>83</sup> This had in fact been done, and it is one feature of the King's effort that Rousseau approved.

Rousseau doubts that even these devices will succeed without the intervention of women, “on whom men’s manner of thinking in great part depends.”<sup>84</sup> And even if all his advice were taken, he doubts that the project could succeed in France because it is contrary to the spirit of monarchy: duels may be a sign of the incompleteness of the King’s sovereignty, but the establishment of a formal body that answers to any kind of law beyond his will would put a flashing neon sign on that incompleteness. Rousseau’s proposed improvement on the King’s scheme is inherently subversive of the King’s sovereignty, and it would take an exceptionally wise monarch to see the advantages of embracing such subversion.

This calls attention to one very important point on which Rousseau agreed with D’Alembert: France would never achieve the kind of happiness seen in Geneva while its regime, or political form, remained unchanged. Rousseau believed he should contribute to defending what republican Geneva had achieved, but without endorsing the Encyclopedists’ far more ambitious project of political and intellectual reform. In the two and a half centuries since Rousseau attacked D’Alembert’s proposal, Enlightenment philosophy has made spectacular progress, both in science and technology and in the spread of liberal and bourgeois institutions. In recent decades, these developments have produced, or at least accompanied, some fairly dramatic transformations of the relations between the sexes and the structure of family life. It is, however, surely too soon to declare that Rousseau’s reservations about the assumptions of the *philosophes* were unjustified. It is therefore not

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<sup>84</sup> *Letter to D’Alembert*, O.C. V, 66.

too late to take seriously the reasons for his dissent, and for his decision to look to Plato as a guide in promoting “a better education [for] that half of the human race that governs the other.”<sup>85</sup>

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#### Note I

*On Theatrical Imitation*, which Rousseau wrote while he was working on the *Letter to D’Alembert*, presents itself as a kind of extract of arguments in Plato against conventional artistic imitation. At the head of the essay, Rousseau placed a notice informing us that he himself did little more than convert Plato’s writing from a dialogue form to a coherent discourse, and that Rousseau had inadvertently released it for publication before deciding what, if anything, to do with it.<sup>86</sup> There are enough echoes from the *Republic* to make the first assertion superficially plausible, and the second assertion would be hard to disprove.

The notice also mentions that Rousseau had been unable to fit this writing “conveniently” into the *Letter*, and that assertion is manifestly credible in a way that calls the other two into question. *Theatrical Imitation* is written in the first person but not in Rousseau’s own voice (except for four footnotes), and it thus constitutes an inexact imitation of Plato’s inexact imitations of Socratic conversations. If for no other reason than this use of the first person, the essay could not have fit conveniently in the *Letter*. But Rousseau’s use of the first person also creates uncertainty as to whether, or to what extent, the paraphrases of speeches from Plato

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<sup>85</sup> *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts*, O.C. III, 21 note \* (quoted in context at the beginning of this article).

<sup>86</sup> O.C. V, 1195.

should be attributed to Socrates, or to Plato, or to Rousseau. In this way, the rhetoric of *Theatrical Imitation* imitates Plato's refusal to indicate whether, or to what extent, the imitations of Socrates in the dialogues are speeches of Plato. Put this together with the irony of attacking imitations in an essay that is an imitation of an imitation, and you find yourself on notice against taking anything in *Theatrical Imitation* at face value.

The thesis of *Theatrical Imitation* is that dramatic authors are "corrupters of the people, or of whoever, allowing himself to be amused by their images, is neither capable of considering them under their true point of view, nor of giving these fables the corrective they need."<sup>87</sup> As this formulation intimates, two somewhat different correctives turn out to be required.

The opening strand of argument in *Theatrical Imitation* seems to treat each thing in the sensible world, including human artifacts, as an imperfect image of models or original ideas that exist "in the understanding of the Architect [or human craftsman], in nature, or at the very least in its Author together with all the possible ideas of which he is the source."<sup>88</sup> Because painters and poets imitate sensible things, their works are imperfect images of imperfect images, and are thus in the order of being "always one degree farther from the truth than one thinks."<sup>89</sup> God is assumed to be the author of the idea that the architect or craftsman imitates in the work he produces.<sup>90</sup> *Theatrical Imitation's* example of an imitation of an idea is a human artifact, namely a palace.<sup>91</sup> This is instantly puzzling. If anything in the world looks intelligible without

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 1196.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 1197.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid. Plato's Socrates is more tentative or equivocal in attributing the authorship of the ideas to a god (*Republic* 597b).

<sup>91</sup> In the *Republic*, Socrates uses household furniture for examples (596a et seq).

the assumption of a divine mind, it would seem to be the things that human beings make.

The puzzle is deepened a little later when *Theatrical Imitation* argues that the architect or craftsman does not have a “true understanding” of the thing he makes.<sup>92</sup> It is Hector the charioteer, not the saddler, who knows what reins should be. More generally, “[i]f the utility, the goodness, the beauty, of an instrument, of an animal, of an action relates to the use drawn from it, if it belongs only to the one who puts them to work to provide the model and to judge whether this model is faithfully executed,” neither the craftsman nor his imitator (such as a painter or poet) can properly judge the qualities of the artifact.<sup>93</sup> It is easy enough to agree that the utility, and perhaps the goodness, of an instrument is best judged by its user. But the “model” then turns out to be specifications of which the user may have no clear idea before a craftsman produces an artifact that does or does not perform in a satisfactory manner. An animal, moreover, is not produced by a human craftsman, and it is difficult to conceive why God the author of all the ideas should be confounded with charioteers and other users of animals. And who exactly is the user who puts a human *action* to work?

These puzzles arise from a conflation of two different objections to painting and poetry, one of which is intellectual and the other moral. One objection is that paintings and poems provide illusions about the world, and thus interfere with the search for truth. In the case of paintings, this is manifestly false. As *Theatrical Imitation* acknowledges when it seeks to avoid “false analogies,” our senses constantly deceive us about the physical world, and we can at least to some extent correct these misleading impressions by

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<sup>92</sup> O.C. V, 1203.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

reasoning with the aid of “[t]he suspension of the mind, [and] the art of measuring, of weighing, of counting.”<sup>94</sup> Paintings deliberately play upon the susceptibility of the senses to illusions, as with the art of perspective. But the viewer knows that the painting is only an image, and an artful one at that, so viewing the painting does nothing to enhance or aggravate the mistakes about the physical world to which our senses make us prone. Viewing a painting will not make one any more likely to believe that the moon is larger when it is close to the horizon than when it is higher in the sky.

Poetry is different. A sufficiently talented poet might persuade a credulous audience that the moon does shrink as it ascends in the sky, perhaps with a story so charming as to deter the suspension of the mind that must occur while one tests one’s sense impressions by taking measurements. More obviously, poets (and sometimes painters, too) present us with pictures of the world and models of human action that “imitate what appears beautiful to the multitude, without caring whether it is so in fact.”<sup>95</sup> This affects us adversely for two somewhat different reasons. First, we may think that a successful poet like Homer “must possess the science of all the [moral and political] things he treats.”<sup>96</sup> Could any intelligent reader leave Homer without at least suspecting as much? Second, poets cause us to yield with a sort of pleasure to passions that embarrass and harm us when they overcome us in our own lives, thus making it harder to control them.<sup>97</sup>

*Theatrical Imitation* suggests two different “correctives.” One is quite straightforward. Banish poetry from our lives unless and until the friends of the poets can persuade us of its usefulness.<sup>98</sup> The

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 1204-05.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 1204.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 1200.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 1208-10.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 1210-11.

other corrective, offered only obliquely, is philosophy. This second suggestion comes in a passage where *Theatrical Imitation* responds to an objection that “the philosopher himself does not know all the arts about which he speaks, and that he often extends his ideas as far as the Poet extends his images.”<sup>99</sup> The response offered is that the philosopher does not present himself as knowing the truth and “*even instructs us through his mistakes.*”<sup>100</sup> Not a bad description of Socrates, as he is presented in Plato, but neither the objection nor the response occurs in any of the passages from Plato paraphrased in *Theatrical Imitation*. It also leaves the usefulness of philosophy in considerable obscurity, and leaves us to wonder how we are to be instructed by *Theatrical Imitation*, whose author seems to have mistakenly and deliberately adopted a more dogmatic rhetoric than Socrates employs in the passages paraphrased in the essay.

One clue is provided by a particularly glaring mistake near the end of *Theatrical Imitation*. Not once but twice, the essay substitutes the name Glaucus for Glaucon in its paraphrase of the discussion that opens Book X of the *Republic*. Glaucus is a mythical god of the sea, whose once human form became unrecognizable through damage from the action of ocean waves and an encrustation of shells, seaweed, and rocks. Socrates likens Glaucus to the human soul “as we see it now” (611b-d). He offers this image after his argument for the immortality of the soul that immediately follows his attack on imitation and the poets, and shortly before he presents his own poetic myth of Er. The statue of Glaucus (an imitation of an imaginary being) is used in the *Discourse on Inequality*, Rousseau’s most openly philosophic work, as an image of the human soul encrusted with an accumulation of effects from social life.<sup>101</sup> The

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<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 1204.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.* (emphasis added).

<sup>101</sup> *O.C.* III, 122.



mistaken use of the name Glaucus thus instructs us, upon reflection, about the need for something that is absent from *Theatrical Imitation*: philosophic poetry.

One of the ways that *Theatrical Imitation* distorts the *Republic* is by starting at the beginning of Book X and paraphrasing part of Book III later in the essay. This reversal of Plato's order calls attention to important differences between the contexts in which Socrates criticizes poetry in Books III and X. Book III's attack on poetry primarily involves Adeimantus as a founder and educator of imaginary men in an imaginary city in speech. There is no claim that he and Glaucon should themselves stay away from poetry, or that they are "not capable of considering [such fables] under their true point of view."<sup>102</sup> When Socrates returns to the topic in Book X, he has already taken Glaucon and the others on a most fantastic imaginary journey out of the cave and into the realm of intelligibles illuminated by the idea of the good, and instructed them, so to speak, about the order of being through the image of the divided line. This is the necessary background (wholly absent from *Theatrical Imitation*) that allows Socrates to invoke the so-called doctrine of ideas when speaking with Glaucon at the beginning of Book X, where it seems less instantly puzzling than it does at the beginning of *Theatrical Imitation*.

Glaucon's intervening journey has also shifted the emphasis from Glaucon as an educator of imaginary citizens to the issue of Glaucon's own education. Or, to put it another way, from the requirements of a just city to those of a just soul. *Theatrical Imitation*, like the discussion of imitation in Book X of the *Republic*, points toward questions about the role of poetic imitation in private education. This may help to explain why Rousseau's initial (and supposedly inadvertent) release of *Theatrical Imitation* occurred

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<sup>102</sup> O.C. V, 1196.

when he sent the manuscript to a publisher along with the plates for *The New Heloise*.<sup>103</sup> That novel, and the private education it depicts, supplies an appropriate complement to *Theatrical Imitation* in a way that the *Letter to D'Alembert* does not.<sup>104</sup>

The *Letter to D'Alembert* attacks imitative poetry in a less uncompromising manner than *Theatrical Imitation*, focusing as it does on the theater (not imitation in general) and acknowledging as it does that its “correctives” are finally applicable only to a city like Geneva. In these respects, the *Letter* resembles the *Laws*.<sup>105</sup>

Some of the Athenian Stranger's statements about poetry resemble some of Socrates' statements in the *Republic*.<sup>106</sup> Unlike Socrates, however, the Stranger introduces comic imitations into his city, where they will serve the purpose of discouraging ridiculous and shameful behavior (816d-817a).<sup>107</sup> So-called serious or tragic poetry, for its part, will be permitted in Magnesia only if and only to the extent that it conveys exactly the same teachings that the laws of the city do (816d-817a). Those teachings are to be conveyed

<sup>103</sup> *O.C. V*, 1831 (editor's note).

<sup>104</sup> Fittingly, the only quotation from Plato in the *Letter to D'Alembert* is from Book III of the *Republic* (*O.C. V*, 109 note \*). In *Rousseau, Judge of Jean-Jacques: Dialogues*, a character named “Rousseau” offers an expressly incomplete list of works about which he says, “I doubt that any philosopher ever meditated more profoundly, more usefully perhaps.” The first work listed is the *Letter to D'Alembert*, the second is *The New Heloise*, and the last is *Theatrical Imitation*. (The others are *Emile*, the *Social Contract*, and *Essays on Perpetual Peace*.) See *O.C. I*, 791.

<sup>105</sup> *Theatrical Imitation* itself points toward the *Laws*, though very indirectly. In a footnote, Rousseau interprets Plato as drawing a sharp distinction between a poet's success in becoming popular and a poet's success in teaching useful things. Rousseau then says that Tyrtaeus might be offered as an example to refute Plato, but contends that Plato could “extricate himself” by treating Tyrtaeus as an orator rather than a poet (*O.C. V*, 1202 note \*). Tyrtaeus is never mentioned in the *Republic*, but he is discussed several times in the *Laws*. Whereas the *Republic* replaces traditional poetry with the philosophic poetry of Socrates, the *Laws* replaces traditional poetry with the philosophic oratory of the Stranger and his “preludes.”

<sup>106</sup> Compare, for example, *Laws* 801c-d with *Republic* 398a-b.

<sup>107</sup> Comedy is attacked along with tragedy in the *Republic* (606c).

primarily through the preludes to the laws, and by the *Laws* itself, neither of which contains the kind of philosophic poetry found in the *Republic*. That is why the Stranger can call the polity or political regime of the *Laws* “the truest tragedy,” or “the imitation of the most beautiful and best way of life” (817b2-5).

As we shall see, the *Letter to D’Alembert* adopts a somewhat similar approach. Rousseau treats the lowest form of shameful comedy as tolerable for Geneva, and preferable to the high comedy of Paris. He also advocates the introduction of a more serious kind of theater consisting of celebrations of what he thinks is the most beautiful and best way of life available to the Genevans. Thus, the *Letter* has a more direct kinship with the *Laws* than with the passages from the *Republic* that are imitated in *Theatrical Imitation*.